ENHANCING THE READERS' COMPREHENSION

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INTRODUCTION

Some readers complain that reading is tedious and hard. Then how can we teachers help them comprehend and enjoy the texts? Linguists and researchers have proved that by activating the readers' background knowledge and thinking processes we can enhance their comprehension of the materials. This paper focuses on this point.

This paper is presented in three parts: (i) the traditional views of reading; (ii) the current views of reading; and (iii) the three reading strategies: pre-, while and post-reading.

TRADITIONAL VIEWS

Hundreds of years ago, reading was viewed as a strenuous pronunciation practice. Because of this philosophy, phonetic lessons from simple to more complex were provided (The French Embassy, 1960, p. 215). In other words, the sounds for letters, letter combinations, and their variations were learnt separately and then blended together to "sound out" the word (Sabaroff, 1970, p. 524). Thus, learning to read was primarily to recognize the printed and the speech symbols

(Buswell, 1959, p. 108). To achieve this, a large chart with a list of letters and sounds was the standard equipment in the classroom (Tensuan and Davis, 1964, p. 8). However, this strategy of teaching was criticized worldwide as the readers' background knowledge was ignored. Moreover, the lessons were not similar to actual speech in everyday life. Therefore, cognitivists suggested a change of teaching views.

CURRENT VIEWS

Since the early 1970's, Cognitive Psychology, highlighting that the whole is different from and greater than its parts, has played an important role in reading (Nist, 1985, p. 84). This school of thought views reading as an active, a constructive, and a reader-based process (Uttero, 1988, p. 390 and Whitehead, 1986, p. 59), which is an integration of skills and numerous strategies to trigger the readers' background knowledge (Nist, 1985, p. 86). In the lesson, the readers read the texts critically by questioning, analyzing, inferring, judging, evaluating and assessing the text through their previous experiences (McCabe, 1984, p. 64).

Language researchers find this view appropriate to classroom applications so they suggest some effective strategies that activate the readers' background knowledge.

READING STRATEGIES

Language researchers and linguists suggest that in reading lessons language teachers should follow these three main steps:

1. Pre-reading
2. While reading
3. Post-reading

1. Pre-reading

The main purpose of this step is to help the readers establish purposes, retain motivation, and connect their background knowledge with the new ideas and information they are going to read (Devine, 1986, p. 75). Following are useful strategies.

1.1 Oral preview

The oral preview is a questioning technique that relates the readers' background knowledge or schema to the content of the text. It comprises: (i) a link between the readers' background knowledge and the message of the text; (ii) a discussion that encourages the readers to guess about the material; (iii) information that contains necessary background knowledge for understanding the text; and (iv) the purpose of reading (Alvermann, 1987, p. 53). The interrogatives "who, what, when, where, why, and how" or yes-no questions are standard tools for this strategy (Whitehead, 1986, p. 66). A concept chart might also be the answer to this step. Below is how it looks.
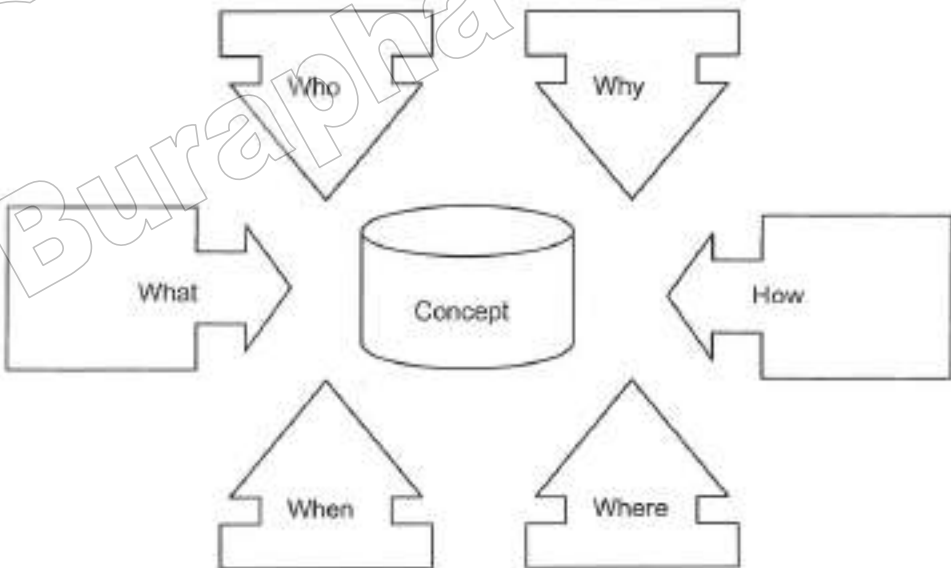
1.2 Semantic mapping

Semantic mapping is a process of constructing visual displays of categories and their relationships (Freedman and Reynolds, 1980, p. 677). A map or web is a graphic arrangement showing the major ideas and relationships in the text or among word meanings. The map consists of "nodes" (drawn in circles, rectangles, or squares) containing key words or phrases, with connecting links like lines or arrows drawn between them (Sinatra, et al., 1984, p. 22). The center of the web includes the topic or main idea, and the spokes contain the related ideas. The type of web is determined by the informational pattern in the text (Clewel and Haidemos, 1983, p. 317). This technique is used to trigger the readers' brains to retrieve their background knowledge about the topic and to use this information in reading (Johnson, et al., 1986, p. 3).

2. While reading

During reading the readers should try to reflect, reason, judge, and think through the content of the text. The following are strategies suggested to stimulate small group discussions and to help the readers think through the text carefully.

2.1 Three-level guides

The three-level guides were found excellent for stimulating small group discussions and for helping the readers think through the implications of the text. They provide the readers with three levels of comprehension: literal level, interpretive level, and applied level.

2.1.1 Literal level

The literal or textually explicit level is the recall of text-based information (Ruddell, 1995, p. 457), or the skill of getting the primary, direct meaning of a word, idea, or sentence in the context (Smith, 1969, p. 255). There is no depth in this kind of reading. In utilizing this skill, the readers have the reading material before them and refer to it for identifying specific information. The remembering type of literal comprehension requires the readers to produce the sought information from memory after they have read the text.

2.1.2 Interpretive level

The interpretive or textually implicit level is the manipulation of text-based information to infer new meaning (Ruddell, 1995, p. 457) involving different thinking skills: (i) inferring; (ii) making generalizations; (iii) reasoning cause and

effect; (iv) anticipating endings; (v) making comparisons; (vi) sensing motives; and (vii) discovering relationships (Smith, 1969, p. 256). The ability to infer depends on the readers' ability to grasp details, their background experiences, and their ability to display reasonable outcomes (Cushenberry, 1969, pp. 101-102). The ability to infer or predict outcomes depends upon the readers' ability to grasp literal details, their background of experience, and their ability to display a reasonable attention span. Active anticipation on the part of the readers leads them to develop a desire to derive the complete meaning from a given selection.

2.1.3 Applied level

The applied or experientially-based level is the transfer of the text-based and personal knowledge to the development of new meaning in a novel situation (Ruddell, 1995, p. 457). The readers evaluate and judge the quality, the value, the accuracy and the truthfulness of the text (Smith, 1969, p. 256). Their task is to select intrinsic relationships, infer new meanings at the interpretive level and place them in juxtaposition to the concepts which are the product of previous knowledge and experience. Thus, numerous answers are

possible.

These three-level guides are useful in improving the readers' comprehension of the text. They give the readers opportunities to reflect, reason and judge or think through the content of the reading text. They also allow the teacher to select literal statements in the text, draw inferences based on these statements and then expand these ideas to embrace wider generalizations and ideas.

2.2 Cloze

Reading is a guess that is either confirmed or denied in search of meaning, rather than a letter and word identification. It involves the partial use of available minimal language cues selected from perceptual input on the basis of the readers' expectation. As this partial information is processed, tentative decisions are made to be confirmed, rejected, or refined as reading progresses. The cloze procedure is an effective method that triggers the readers' thoughts (Duffelmeyer, 1984, p. 103 and Thomas, 1978, p. 3).

The cloze is a method that deletes words in written passages, requiring that the readers fill in the gaps to make the message whole again (Kaminsky, 1979, p. 12). In making word predictions, the readers use their background knowledge, general understanding

of the material, context clues, and a knowledge of word usage (Culhane, 1970, p. 410).

The cloze is divided into two categories: strict and modified clozes. The former omits words at the regular nth intervals -- fifth, eighth or tenth -- while the first and last sentences of the passage remain unchanged. The latter may omit words at regular intervals, but clues to their meanings are provided. Sometimes omitted words are selective, depending on particular purposes (Davis, 1985, pp. 585-586). In both types, the readers have to process the clues to word meanings and word orders (Culhane, 1970, p. 419).

3. Post-reading

Reading and writing are intimately linked. Through reading, the readers preview, read, and reread. Through writing, they prewrite, write, and rewrite (Langan, 1986, pp. 527-528). These two skills work together in several ways:

(1) Reading and writing are interrelated language skills. Through reading, the readers learn almost subconsciously how well the author puts sentences together and organizes ideas. In addition, the readers acquire new words. Through writing, the readers begin to use what they have already learnt by reading. They also gain intensive practice in being logical, a skill that is essential to understanding more difficult reading material.

(2) Both reading and writing are processes. The readers become better readers by treating each task as a process. They preview, read, and reread, or they prewrite, write and rewrite. With each step, their skills become sharper and the final product --their understanding of what they have read or the paper they have written -- becomes finer.

(3) Both reading and writing are vital for communication. Competence in reading and writing is an essential survival skill if the readers wish to make their voices heard and their ideas known.

The inclusion of a writing component helps the readers to reform the texts in their own words. They are to use their own prior knowledge and the information they gained from the reading text in their writing. To help the readers integrate what they read with their background knowledge, Smith and Bean (1980, pp. 292-293) suggest the Guided Writing procedure. Its steps are as follows. First, the readers in each group (four to five members) comment on and

write down what they have learnt in the text, vote on the main ideas and details, then write two short paragraphs (three sentences each). Second, the readers' papers are collected, commented on, and returned. Third, the readers edit, polish and submit their final draft to the teacher.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this paper focused on suggestions for strategies to enhance the readers' understanding of texts.

First, the traditional views of reading, focusing on pronouncing and distinguishing letters and words, were outlined. Second, the present views, emphasizing on applying the readers' existing knowledge to the materials, were discussed. Third, the strategies -- pre-, during, and post-reading -- including their meanings and procedures were detailed.

These techniques can help to increase the readers' comprehension and can be used to model classroom reading activities in a meaningful and effective way.

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